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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 9198
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4585
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000418

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BURMA: BAN DELIVERS STRONG MESSAGES; GENERALS DON'T REPLY

REF: RANGOON 407

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Larry Dinger for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

11. (C) During UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's July 3-4 visit to Burma, he met with Than Shwe, PM Thein Sein, several opposition and ethnic leaders, and his UN Country Team. Ban reportedly conveyed a strong message on the need for political and economic reform to the generals. He also visited the Irrawaddy Delta. In a 50-minute address to the diplomatic corps, UN staff, the press, and NGOs prior to his departure from Burma, Ban expressed disappointment that Than Shwe had refused his requests to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), calling it a missed opportunity and a setback to the international community's efforts to meet the needs of the country.

12. (C) The NLD told us that, in their meeting with Ban, four Central Executive Committee members conveyed four requests -- respect for human rights, including the release of political prisoners; initiation of dialogue between the regime and NLD; a review of the regime's constitution; and a symbolic recognition of the 1990 election results. Ban listened attentively but offered little more. A key opposition contact told us many activists think Ban delivered a strong speech, but consider his overall visit to be a failure. The UN ResRep in Rangoon expressed hope the SYG's clear articulation of painful truths to the generals might help bring more progressive regime policies eventually. End summary.

Nay Pyi Taw: One-sided Conversations

13. (C) UN ResRep Parajuli (protect), who attended the SYG's meetings, told the Charge on July 7 that Ban raised all the promised issues with Senior General Than Shwe and his State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) fellow generals. His first session with them on July 3 lasted two hours instead of the scheduled one hour. A follow-on session the morning of July 4 went for 30 minutes. Ban started softly, recalling the international community's generosity after Cyclone Nargis. He described Burma's poor human-development indicators. He said donors are ready to do much more, but political

progress is essential, including the release of ASSK and other political prisoners. At one point, Ban advised flatly: "Just release her." Ban raised human rights, the need for reconciliation, and the importance of credible elections which, he emphasized must meet international standards. Ban also described the need for donor access, including prompt issuance of visas. Parajuli said one issue Ban did not raise, at least not in the large-group setting, was North Korea.

¶4. (C) Than Shwe was the only one of the generals to speak. He talked of the GOB's efforts to respond to Nargis, claiming the relief/recovery phase is essentially over. He talked of ongoing efforts to prepare for credible elections. But Parajuli said the general did not respond to the SYG's other political points. Parajuli perceived that Ban's efforts to emphasize the benefits of increased engagement with the international community (aid, trade, etc.) if regime behavior were to improve "didn't grab" the generals. Than Shwe did say at one point, "Next time you come I'll be a civilian." To Parajuli, Than Shwe looked weak compared to last May, without much energy. In contrast, the other SPDC members were alert and observant.

¶5. (C) The SYG had hoped to first meet with Than Shwe, then with ASSK, then with Than Shwe again. Ban pushed hard for the ASSK meeting, but Than Shwe insisted that would be an inappropriate interference with the ongoing trial. Ban raised the subject a second time in a small-group setting at the end of the first meeting, still without success. The July 4 meeting brought a final "no," though the UN had kept a gap in the schedule just in case. From the back and forth, Parajuli judges that the generals "are very afraid of ASSK."

¶6. (C) Parajuli concluded that Ban "conveyed the right messages, and they (the generals) heard him," even if they didn't agree or respond

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immediately. The SYG knew the risks. No previous SYG in the past 44 years was willing to take such risks, given the generals' intransigence. In Parajuli's view, Ban deserves credit for shining the light of day on Burma's political and economic flaws to leaders who never hear such truths. Parajuli reported it was clear in Ban's meeting with the UN team that he will stay engaged on the issues in Burma. To Parajuli it appeared that the SYG and Than Shwe have developed enough rapport that Ban can now pick up the phone and call anytime.

NLD Perceives Slight by SYG

¶7. (C) Four NLD CEC members traveled to Nay Pyi Taw to meet with Ban. Than Tun and Nyunt Wai, who were present, told P/E Chief July 7 that the NLD leaders initially were in a group with approximately 20 members of other "registered" political parties. According to Nyunt Wai, Ban told assembled politicians that due to his pressing schedule, each would be permitted to speak for only a couple minutes. Nyunt Wai said he immediately objected to the format and urged Ban to meet separately with the NLD. After hearing from the other gathered politicians, Ban took the NLD leaders to his bedroom for a short, private conversation. CEC members conveyed four requests -- respect for human rights, including the release of political prisoners; initiation of dialogue between the regime and NLD; a review of the regime's constitution; and a symbolic recognition of the 1990 election results.

¶8. (C) Nyunt Wai said Ban listened attentively but offered little more. To the NLD, Ban left the impression that the UN would take the Senior General at his word that planned 2010 elections would be free and fair. Neither Nyunt Wai nor Than Tun were familiar with Ban's statements in Rangoon or Bangkok (see below) and thus were unable to comment on the substance.

¶9. (C) Parajuli confirmed that the NLD leaders were not happy in the large group so Ban later met with them separately for what Parajuli said was a 30-minute conversation. He said the main NLD message was unhappiness with the party's very limited political space in which to operate. Parajuli said Ban offered the NLD leaders an opportunity to supplement their conversation with written concerns. Parajuli noted

that representatives of the other political parties and ceasefire groups invited to Nay Pyi Taw to meet with the SYG were obviously "speaking with the voice of the government."

Ban's Message in Rangoon

¶10. (U) In a 50-minute address to the diplomatic corps, UN staff, the press, and NGOs prior to his departure from Burma the evening of July 4, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed his disappointment that Than Shwe had refused his requests to meet with ASSK, calling it a missed opportunity and a setback to the international community's efforts to meet the needs of the country.

¶11. (C) Prior to delivery, Ban's speech was pitched as an opportunity to thank "stakeholders" for their Nargis relief efforts. However, he quickly moved past that theme - which was likely necessary to secure GOB permission for the public appearance - and devoted the bulk of his remarks to take the regime to task for its failure to make progress on human rights and democracy. Parajuli said the speech went through about forty drafts, with the message getting tougher and tougher as the trip unfolded.

¶12. (U) Ban was candid and critical, saying he had delivered three central messages to the GOB:

- First, he called on the regime to respect human rights and release all political prisoners including ASSK. He added that she must be allowed to participate in the political process. Ban said he stressed that the 2010 elections must be inclusive, transparent, legitimate, and free and fair. Ban said he spoke at length about these issues, hammering home that democracy and human rights are essential to promote stability and economic development, and to restore Burma's "rightful place in the international community."

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- Second, he said he emphasized the ongoing humanitarian needs in the Irrawaddy Delta and called on the regime to recognize the value of engagement with, rather than isolation from, the international community, noting that humanitarian imperatives and sovereignty need not be contradictory.

- Third, Ban stated that he noted millions of Burmese continue to live in poverty and that declining living standards and food insecurity remain major concerns; he called on the regime to "unleash the country's economic potential." He also pointed out that Burma has often said cooperation with the UN is the cornerstone of its foreign policy, and he called on the GOB to match its deeds with its words.

¶13. (C) Ban's speech was well attended, including by members of the Burmese and international press. The GOB Minister of Social Welfare, the head of the civil service, the Attorney General, and the Deputy Minister of Health were in attendance. Interestingly, the Foreign Minister was not. At the end, most in the audience clapped loudly; the GOB senior officials stayed quiet. We hear Ban requested to deliver his speech in English without interruption, but that the regime insisted on consecutive interpretation from English to Burmese. Parajuli related many more instances of GOB officials fighting over every schedule detail, giving the clear impression that all decisions were coming from the top.

¶14. (U) Later on the evening of July 4 Ban delivered remarks to the media in Bangkok which reportedly echoed the themes he raised in his Rangoon address.

Opposition Reactions

¶15. (C) On July 7, leading 88 Generation Students (88GS) member Toe Kyaw Hlaing told Poloff most of his colleagues in 88GS and the opposition think Ban delivered a strong speech, but consider his overall visit to be a failure. He told us that activists he has spoken with, including Arakan League for Democracy Joint Secretary Aye Thar Aung, think Ban focused too much on the 2010 elections and

not enough on the underlying flaws in the constitution. Toe Kyaw Hlaing noted official Burmese media described Ban as supportive of its "roadmap to democracy" and commented the regime is clearly attempting to use Ban's visit as a propaganda tool. Finally, Toe Kyaw Hlaing said the UNSYG's failure to secure a meeting with ASSK was seen by many as unacceptable, noting the strong emotional pull the ASSK issue has among the opposition and Burmese people.

Comment

¶16. (C) Most Burmese and foreign observers we have spoken with were favorably impressed with the tone and substance of Ban's speech. Reaction to the visit as a whole, however, is mixed, with some viewing it as a failure and others seeing it as the start of a long, but potentially fruitful process. The inability to secure a meeting with ASSK was an obvious setback; but one hopes that calling out the regime on its home turf might cause some in Nay Pyi Taw to consider afresh that it is not just the U.S., UK, and EU who have grave concerns about the situation in Burma. Given history here, soul searching is not Than Shwe's strong suit; but he reportedly never receives bad news from his underlings. He did hear bad news during the SYG visit, and that is a useful development.

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